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3. (Three times amended) An encoding apparatus as set forth in claim 2, further comprising:

a fixed length encoding means for performing fixed length encoding for each slice data block comprising an image slice, and wherein

said variable length coding means performs variable length coding on each slice data block.

4. (Twice amended) An encoding apparatus as set forth in claim 3, wherein said fixed length encoding means comprises:

a motion compensation predicting means for selectively carrying out motion compensation prediction by referring to a reference image,

a transform means for carrying out a predetermined transform with respect to pixel data of a result of said motion compensation prediction or with respect to original pixel data to provide transformed block data, and

a quantizing means for quantizing the transformed block data to provide quantized block data, and

a local decoding means for decoding the transformed block data to generate the reference image to be supplied to said motion compensation predicting means, and wherein

said variable length coding means carries out variable length coding on the quantized block data.

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6. (Twice amended) An encoding apparatus as set forth in claim 4, wherein the said predetermined transform is any of a discrete cosine transform, a Fourier transform, a Hadamard transform, and a K-L transform.

7. (Three times amended) An encoding method for encoding a data stream, the method comprising:

dividing said data stream into a plurality of data blocks, each data block comprising one of a macroblock and a slice;

encoding said data blocks in parallel to produce encoded data blocks by performing a predetermined transform with respect to predicted error or pixel value of the assigned data block and quantization with respect to a predetermined transform coefficient generated in said predetermined transform;

successively carrying out variable length coding for the encoded data blocks with respect to the result of said quantization; and

successively allotting additional data blocks that have completed variable length coding; wherein

end of variable length coding of a data block is awaited when the variable length coding of a previous data block has not yet ended.

8. (Twice amended) An encoding method as set forth in claim 7, further comprising detecting when variable length coding for a current data block has been completed and beginning variable length coding of a subsequent data block.

9. (Twice amended) An encoding method as set forth in claim 8, wherein

said data stream comprises image data,

and further comprising:

performing motion compensation prediction for said data blocks by referring to a reference image to generate compensated data blocks;

performing a predetermined transformation on the compensated data blocks to generate transformed data blocks;

quantizing the transformed data blocks to generate quantized data blocks; and

obtaining the reference image from at least one of the quantized data blocks.

10. (Three times amended) A decoding apparatus for decoding a data stream comprising a plurality of data blocks, the decoding apparatus comprising:

a system comprising a signal processing device, wherein

each data block comprises a macroblock or a slice,

and wherein a first assigned data block is decoded in parallel with a second assigned data block,

and wherein the processing device includes at least:

variable length decoding means for performing variable decoding with respect to encoded data of the assigned data block, and

decoding means for performing an inverse quantization with respect to the result of said variable length decoding and an inverse predetermined transform with respect to the result of said inverse quantization,

to produce said decoded data blocks, and wherein

end of variable length decoding of a data block is awaited when the variable length decoding of a previous data block has not yet ended.

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11. (Three times amended) A decoding apparatus as set forth in claim 10, wherein said variable length decoding means detects completion of the variable length decoding of a current data block and starts variable length decoding of a subsequent data block.

12. (Three times amended) A decoding apparatus as set forth in claim 11, further comprising an allotting means for sequentially allotting the data blocks to said signal processing device, and

wherein the signal processing device performs both the variable length decoding and the fixed length decoding of each data block.

13. (Three times amended) A decoding apparatus as set forth in claim 11, wherein said data stream is a variable length coded image data stream obtained by fixed length and variable length encoding of image data blocks and wherein the signal processing device performs both the variable length decoding and the fixed length decoding of each data block.

14. (Twice amended) A decoding apparatus as set forth in claim 13, wherein said decoding means of said signal processing device comprises

- an inverse quantizing means for inverse quantizing variable length decoded data blocks to obtain inverse quantized data blocks,
- an inverse transform means for carrying out an inverse transform on said inverse quantized data blocks to obtain inverse transformed data blocks,
- an image data generating means for generating original image data by referring to a reference image, and
- a motion compensation processing means for carrying out motion compensation processing based on at least one of the inverse transformed data blocks and said image data blocks to generate said reference image.

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16. (Twice amended) A decoding apparatus as set forth in claim 14, wherein said inverse transform is one of a discrete cosine transform, Fourier transform, Hadamard transform, and K-L transform.

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17. (Three times amended) A decoding method for decoding a data stream comprising a plurality of data blocks, the method comprising:

- wherein each data block is one of a macroblock or a slice,
- in said signal processing device, carrying out both variable length decoding on data blocks followed by fixed length decoding of the data blocks,
- wherein the signal processing device performs the variable length decoding and fixed length decoding of data blocks in parallel, and wherein
- said variable length decoding and fixed length decoding comprise:
 - variable length decoding with respect to encoded data of a data block, and
 - inverse quantization to produce quantized data blocks, and
 - decoding by performing an inverse quantization with respect to the result of said variable length decoding and an inverse predetermined transform with respect to the result of said inverse quantization
- to produce decoded data blocks, and wherein
- end of decoding of a data block is awaited when the decoding of a previous data block has not yet ended.

18. (Three times amended) A decoding method as set forth in claim 17, wherein said signal processing device detects when variable length decoding for a current data block has been completed and begins variable length decoding of a subsequent data block.

19. (Three times amended) A decoding method as set forth in claim 18, wherein said data stream comprises a plurality of image data blocks, and further comprising, in said signal processing device,

- inverse quantizing the image data blocks to generate quantized data blocks;
- performing an inverse transformation on the quantized data blocks to generate transformed data blocks;
- obtaining original image data from at least one of the transformed data blocks;

and

- performing motion compensation processing for said transformed data blocks.